SHORT STORIES

The final draft means it’s time to invite the reader in

By Sharon Oard Warner

Recently I received a message from an editor at Random House with a trailer that said: Please consider your environmental responsibility: Before printing this e-mail, ask yourself whether you really need a hard copy.

The suggestion is corporate, meant to save paper at Random House, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t good advice. We all need to consider our actions in light of the greater good, and I’m happy to report I didn’t print the message.

Disclaimer aside, though, I do advocate for the occasional paper copy, and one of these times is on the eve of finishing a short story. Delay as long as is necessary the use of paper and printer cartridges. Draft and revise on-screen to your heart’s content—as long as you’re vigilant about backing up with a flash drive—but when the piece of fiction is as good as you can make it, then the time has come to print it.

Don’t read the story right away. Leave it on your desk a day or so, and when you feel ready to banish the writer and invite the reader, sit down with your pages and read them straight through. Don’t read with a pencil or a pen. You’re not an author and for now, anyway, you’re not an editor, either. You’re simply a gentle and careful reader, someone with both the time and the inclination to begin and finish a story in one sitting. It’s important to gulp rather than sip because you want the experience and not just the flavor.

After you’ve read and savored the ending, put down the story and take up your pen. Make some notes.

First things first: Are you still committed to the title? Does the current title suit the finished story’s tone and subject matter? As a reader, do you find the title engaging or intriguing? If you have doubts about the message your title conveys, go with your instincts.

Supposing the title was one of the first things you settled on, it’s reasonable to assume that the story has evolved and changed such that the title is now vestigial, something left over or outgrown. In that case, you may find the perfect title curled up in a key passage, just waiting to be discovered.

Take the title of a story by Elizabeth Strout, for instance. The story is called “A Little Burst,” and the reference comes from a moment halfway through when middle-aged Olive Kitteridge ponders the patterns of our lives, the ways in which we depend on “big bursts” and “little bursts.” Little bursts, she thinks, are life’s small pleasures, “like the waitress at Dunkin’ Donuts who knows how you like your coffee.” But little bursts can be darker and more disturbing as well, which we learn by the story’s end.

Next things next: Do your opening lines compel the reader forward? Does your story begin briskly, with discernible action and the introduction of character?

Short stories are small vessels best launched quickly and cleanly into deep water. The first lines set the tone for the story and put the reader at ease.

In a workshop at last year’s Taos Summer Writers’ Conference, Strout talked to participants about how the opening lines of a story convey the writer’s authority. Her story “A Different Road” begins this way: “An awful thing happened to the Kitteridges on a chilly night in June.” The story is launched—we are already headed into deep water, and it’s clear the writer is in complete control of the vessel. As with the vestigial title, writers often cling to the opening that launched the writing of the story when they need to search instead for the opening that will launch the story itself.

Last but not least: Does your story take us somewhere interesting? This vessel must head somewhere swiftly and surely, and the reader should be ever more curious as the story sweeps her along to a final destination.

When it comes to structuring a story, there’s no dodging the fact that stories, like life, are about problems. Characters are constantly struggling, and stories must animate and enliven their struggles. Strout’s story “A Different Road” delivers on its opening line, such that by the end of the story, husband and wife have survived an ordeal and been altered by it. We readers have been reminded of our own fragility and how all of us are at the mercy of our individual fates.

Sharon Oard Warner
Sharon Oard Warner teaches at the University of New Mexico and is founding director of the Taos Summer Writers’ Conference. She has published a novel and story collection and has recently completed a second novel, Sophie’s House of Cards.

RESOURCES

The Emerging Writer’s Network (www.emergingwriters.typepad.com) is a lively, intelligent source of information and inspiration for short-story writers and readers of literary fiction.